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FURTHER PROMOTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF THE PROGRAMME AND METHODS OF WORK OF THE COMMISSION: INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE FAMILY

Written statement submitted by: the International Council of Women, the International Movement ATD Fourth World, the International Social Security Association, the Soroptimist International Association, Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status (category I); Caritas Internationalis, the International Abolitionist Federation, the International Catholic Child Bureau, the International Council of Jewish Women, the International Federation of Women in Legal Careers, the International Federation Terre des Hommes, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Pax Christi International, Pax Romana, the World Federalist Movement, the World Federation of Methodist Women, the World Movement of Mothers, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, non-governmental organizations in consultative status (category II); the Centre Europe-Tiers Monde, the International Association of Charities, the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, the Movement against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples, the World Christian Life Community, non-governmental organizations on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is distributed in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[14 February 1993]

Joint statement
in connection with the International Year of the Family (IYF)
by the non-governmental organizations meeting on
1 February 1994 at the Palais des Nations, Geneva
under the auspices of the Fourth World NGO Committee

For the attention of: the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna, the United Nations IYF secretariat, Government representatives to the United Nations, the Commission on Human Rights, the international and national bodies concerned, the non-governmental organizations concerned, and all private individuals

Families denied the right to live together as a result of extreme poverty, armed conflict, natural disasters or other causes, parents arbitrarily separated from their children, and children taken from their parents and forced to grow up away from their families or without a home constitute a continuing challenge to the international community.

The International Year of the Family now beginning ought to be a year in which the international community gives ear to families throughout the world, including dismembered families torn apart by hunger, violence, displacement, intolerance and ignorance. Such families, their lives, thinking and experience must serve as a guide to reflection on the role of the family in society, in the development process, and in the fight against extreme poverty and social exclusion.

The United Nations has at all times recognized the importance of the family: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on human rights recognize that every human being has the right to found a family and the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, for its part, recognizes that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance to enable it fully to assume its responsibilities within the community, and that parents should be assisted in the performance of their responsibilities.

The impact of extreme poverty on families and on their cohesion, well-being, health and respect for their rights and those of their members has now been recognized. Urgent action is therefore needed to combat extreme poverty at the local, national, regional and international levels.

The goal of the non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council is to promote the ideals enshrined in the Charter and other basic instruments of the United Nations.

For that reason, the signatories, non-governmental organizations, aware:

- that the family is the principal and sometimes only, environment in which the poorest can enjoy their dignity as human beings;

- that the individuals, families and peoples most affected by poverty should be represented in all deliberative and decision-making bodies and to that end have need of individuals and organizations pledged to their interests in the long term;

- that the poorest families are likely to remain outside the ambit of programmes and policies for family welfare in the absence of comprehensive family and social policies that extend to all families and all aspects of family life, and in the absence of comprehensive policies to combat extreme poverty;

- that there is a need to gain a better understanding of the poorest families by working together with them;

Undertake:

- to promote representation of the poorest and their families in all deliberative and decision-making bodies;

- to foster, at the national and international levels, the establishment of exchanges and meetings generating information to broaden the understanding of the poorest families, thus involving them in the work being done on their behalf, and to assess with them from time to time the effect on them of the projects designed for them;

- to ensure that comprehensive policies to improve the lot of families are introduced in partnership with the poorest families and based on their experiences, their thinking and their aspirations, a knowledge of which is indispensable for the welfare of all families, regardless of their social level;

- to persuade international and national authorities to encourage families to keep together wherever possible; families should no longer be permitted to break up owing to hunger, poverty, violence or ignorance;

- to encourage individuals and organizations to work together on a long-term basis with families living in extreme poverty, act as a link between such families and the rest of the community, and enable them to become actively involved in development.

1. The family is the principal environment in which the poorest can experience their dignity as human beings

By their actions, which reveal their dignity, their rejection of poverty, their brotherhood, their solidarity and sense of justice, the poorest families are already engaged in the practice and defence of human rights in all their

indivisibility. Living in a family, becoming involved with other people on a long-term basis, refusing to give up hope, and defending or protecting those in misfortune are all ways of affirming membership of humankind and rejecting poverty. In the same way, no one can speak of human rights for all and accept that some are precluded by poverty from the full and free enjoyment of their rights, including the fundamental right to family life.

2. Ensuring representation of the poorest

The conditions endured by families living in extreme poverty are surely those that may menace any family, which thus hopes for protection from them. Such families must therefore be represented in all national, international or regional forums in order to make known their experiences and their thinking, not only in their own interests but also to warn all other individuals and families of the dangers that may threaten them. It has been shown by experience that although the poorest are in desperate need of a helping hand to break out of the poverty that enslaves them, the precondition, if such help is not to crush them, is that they must be allowed to take the lead in their liberation. To give consideration to the poorest families, their aspirations, their thinking and their power for action, to give the floor to those who heretofore have always had to keep out of sight and stay silent to preserve their integrity, is to establish mutual trust and to believe that families can be taught to speak out, to engage in dialogue and to work with others. To achieve that, men and women need teaching, to be given individual and collective attention in the long term and for others to be on their side.

3. Need for a comprehensive policy

Because in the poorest families all areas of life are affected, because through their children they have made their mark in the past and will do so in the future, there is a need for comprehensive long-term policies centred on the family. A comprehensive family policy would cover all aspects of family life, encourage the further development of the family and all its members, and apply to all families, whatever their social, economic or cultural level. A comprehensive policy would also imply the involvement of all individuals, including the poorest, in order to build the future of their country with them and on the basis of what may be learned from them.

4. Better understanding of the poorest families through partnership with them

No policy intended to promote the welfare of the poorest families can succeed without a proper understanding of such families gained through partnership with them. Such understanding must include not only facts and figures but also their expectations, aspirations and their potential as a force for development. Such understanding cannot be gained purely by scientific means; it demands active personal involvement with such families and must allow families themselves to take part in the process without loss of self-respect. Moreover, the poorest cannot experience any transmission of ethics or real social change if constant efforts are made to eradicate all memory of their past. Such understanding can only be achieved by determined national and international efforts.